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Race and Ethnicity in American Politics
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Issue Brief: Middle Eastern Americans and Violence

Key Words

Post-9/11, hate crime, Muslim-American, turban, Arab-American, discrimination, hate crimes, mosque, racial profiling

Description

This brief will examine discriminatory violence committed by individuals and US government entities against Middle Eastern Americans, emphasizing the post-September 11th era of sustained anti-Muslim and anti-Arab sentiment in the United States, and how it has resulted in racially- & religiously-motivated violence against this community.

Key Points

- Though there is a some history of discrimination against Middle Eastern Americans in the United States, violent acts against Arab and Muslim communities have risen very sharply in the wake of 9/11
- Much of the violence against Middle Eastern Americans though circumstantially racial, is often intended as an attack on Muslims, but victims of these crimes quite frequently include large numbers of non-Muslims (e.g. Sikhs, Christian middle-easterners, Jews, and others)
- Frequently 'violence' comes in the form of property damage and/or the threat of violence. There are many types of behaviors that don't physically harm their targets but are intended to demean, intimidate, financially damage, or otherwise harm their Middle Eastern American targets. Violent crimes also frequently target mosques and other establishments in Muslim communities rather than individuals.
- Government-sanctioned discrimination in the form of racial profiling (e.g. the Transportation Security Agency airport practices) may contribute to the epidemic by suggesting to the public that racial and religious discrimination are condoned in the context of post-9/11 security concerns
 - There are also numerous more extreme examples of US government detaining, and in some instances deporting, torturing, & otherwise abusing Middle Eastern Americans under the auspices of national security – who are ordinary citizens with absolutely no connection to the foreign governments and terrorist organizations that we are supposedly being protected against
 - Infamous cases:
 - Brandon Mayfield: Portland, OR native – home invaded by FBI, spied upon, imprisoned, believed to be responsible for the Madrid train bombings even though the Spanish government had already dismissed the evidence against him and found the actual perpetrator
 - Maher Arar: Canadian citizen, detained by the US, denied access to council, imprisoned and tortured for more than a year

Issue Brief

Though the US had some legacy of discrimination against Middle Eastern Americans, an enormous amount of the animosity and violence directed towards their community can be directly attributed to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks: according to a 2003 study “FBI data suggests a 1,600-percent surge in anti-Islamic hate crimes in the days following the Sept. 11 attacks.”¹ Violence against Middle Eastern Americans as an ethnoracial group, is directed at the Muslim community and the perpetrators of the crimes frequently misinterpret Middle-Eastern descent as being synonymous with being a practicing Muslim.

The levels of violence against Middle Eastern Americans have declined steadily in the years since the September 11th attacks, however they are still about 47% higher than pre-9/11 levels, according to data collected by the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee.² Most interestingly, incidences of hate crimes against Middle Eastern Americans tend to increase substantially after acts of terrorism perceived to have been committed by Muslims make news headlines internationally. For example, the FBI’s total reported number of “anti-Islamic offenses” increased by more than 20% between 2005 and 2006,³ in the wake of the enormous media attention paid to the London Subway bombings. These trends seems to affirm the commonly-held beliefs that hate-crimes are as much, if not more, motivated by fear than by a desire for personal retribution towards a particular group for a perceived wrongdoing or injustice.

A significant amount of the violence targeting Middle Eastern Americans comes in the form of threats and intimidation, rather than physical harm. The incident in October of 2007 in which Nina Timan, a supervisor at a Sheraton hotel in Pennsylvania who received a threatening letter at her workplace, is representative of countless other similar crimes. The letter that she received “included the phrases “Remember 9/11,” “you and your kids will die like dogs,” “tie onto the fence,” “death,” and other references to death and hanging.” It was later revealed that the letter was sent by a subordinate at her work. And quite frequently victims of anti-Arab hate crimes have their homes and other property vandalized by neighbors and colleagues.⁴

In addition to violence perpetuated by individuals, Middle Eastern Americans are frequently subjected to additional scrutiny and detentions by the US government during their travels and day-to-day lives through the use of racial profiling. Both the constitutionality and effectiveness of racial profiling as a means of improving national security efforts are highly suspect: analysis of the Department of Homeland Security’s “Operation Frontline,” which used profiling to disrupt terror operations among immigrants, finds found that while immigrants from Muslim countries were about 1,280 times more likely to be investigated than other immigrants, this increased scrutiny did not yield a single arrest.⁵

There are also numerous examples of racial profiling resulting in appalling violence against Middle Eastern Americans. Among the most salient cases is that of Canadian citizen Maher Arar, who had immigrated to Canada from Syria at the age of 17, obtained several degrees at McGill University, and was a steadily employed husband and father of two young children. In September of 2002, as his family was returning from a vacation in Tunisia, Mr. Arar was detained during a layover at John F. Kennedy airport in New York. Mr. Arar was detained in solitary confinement in the United States for two weeks and then was eventually deported to

¹ <http://www.bsu.edu/news/article/0,1370,-1019-12850,00.html>

² <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE4B30V920081204>

³ <http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/pdf/fd/08/fd-080924-muslims-web.pdf>

⁴ http://www.worldproutassembly.org/archives/2007/10/woman_charged_w.html

⁵ <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/11/21/INS3149NFE.DTL>

Syria, where he was tortured and detained for one year. Throughout his imprisonment, Mr. Arar was not permitted access to meaningful legal counsel, nor was he ever charged with a crime. Mr. Arar's case, though abhorrent, is not an isolated incident: these types of government-enacted violence with complete disregard for the civil liberties of Middle Easterners are all too common under the auspices of security in the post-9/11 era.⁶

Infringements on the rights and freedoms of Middle Eastern Americans by the United States government are an implicit statement that acts of bigotry and racial bias are somehow acceptable, if motivated by fear or under the guise of self-preservation. Profiling "legitimizes all forms of violence (violence as violation of one's human dignity, value and rights) against the 'other,' and portrays this violence as a 'sacred' act."⁷ These acts undermine the liberty of all Americans, not just those of Middle Eastern descent. Many experts believe that curbing violence will require stronger a combination of stronger hate-crime legislation, an end to government-sanctioned discrimination through profiling, as well as a paradigmatic shift in the depictions of Middle Eastern Americans in the media and popular culture.

Images



American protester exemplifies anti-Arab sentiment, in the wake of September 11th.⁸

⁶ http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/19/opinion/19mon3.html?_r=1

⁷ <http://dissidentvoice.org/2009/08/%E2%80%99Cyour-name-is-common%E2%80%9D-racial-profiling-in-the-us/>

⁸ http://www.salem-news.com/articles/october152009/israel_tours.php



A young Muslim protester epitomizes the clash of conservative Islam with American liberalism and cultural freedom.⁹



Maher Arar is reunited with his children after more than a year of torture and false imprisonment by the United States government.¹⁰

⁹ <http://www.faithfreedom.org/Gallery/freedomofexpression.jpg>

¹⁰ <http://www.slate.com/id/2220806/>

General References:*

- *Human Rights First, Violence Against Muslims: 2008 Hate Crime Survey*,
<<http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/pdf/fd/08/fd-080924-muslims-web.pdf>>
- *Encyclopedia of Racism in the United States*, “Government Initiatives after the September 11th Attack on America” by Anny Bakalian and Mehdi Bozorgmehr
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- *Encyclopedia of Racism in the United States*, “Discriminatory Reactions to September 11, 2001 Terrorism” by Anny Bakalian and Mehdi Bozorgmehr
- *Backlash 9/11: Middle Eastern and Muslim Americans Respond* by Anny Bakalian & Mehdi Bozorgmehr
- *How Does It Feel to Be a Problem?: Being Young and Arab in America* by Moustafa Bayoumi

Other Relevant Links:*

- <http://www.mearo.org/>
- <http://www.middleeastamerica.org/>
- <http://www.masnet.org/>
- <http://web.gc.cuny.edu/memeac/index.html>
- <http://canarypapers.wordpress.com/2009/05/31/183-times-is-the-charm-the-accusation-by-torture-of-a-young-mother-named-aafia-siddiqui/>
- <http://web.gc.cuny.edu/memeac/MuslimAmericanMobilization%20DIASPORA%20Jr.pdf>
- <http://library.thinkquest.org/CR0210341/today/violence.htm>
- <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1677175,00.html>
- http://www.javno.com/en-world/arab-american-hate-crimes-down-after-911--report_210765

* These lists exclude sources cited in the text of the issue brief, which are provided as links in the footnotes